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ABSTRACT

Fourteen papers from the 1992 meeting of the American Educational Research Association dealing with collaborative research were reviewed to see if they met the definition of action research. The relationship between the two forms of research is the subject of some controversy. It is argued that some collaborative research can be appropriately described as action research, but that some action research is not collaborative research. Collaborating researchers are not necessary for action research, but a study cannot be classified as collaborative research without collaborators and self-reflection. Thirteen of the papers examined illustrated collaborative research efforts representing five different models of collaboration. The collaborative research reported in these papers showed results that offer improvement of practice while planting seeds for further research. Benefits of peer interaction appear to be one emerging theme in collaborative research. Two tables illustrate the discussion. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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Collaborative Research: the new kid on the block

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Introduction

Many practicing educators tend to deny the benefits of "basic research" or research that has for its major purpose generation of "conclusion related results" that contribute to a department of knowledge. Instead, they tend to favor "action research" or research which has as its major purpose the generation of "decision related results" that contribute to the making of choice in our immediate experience. This distinction concerning the research dichotomy was made earlier by Cronbach and Suppes in their paper regarding the future disposition of research (Cronbach and Suppes, 1965). Hence, in research associations such as MSERA, special interest groups often develop from interests associated with action research. The essence and genesis of this paper grew out of a dispute occurring in AERA's Action Research SIG.

SIG groups are often formed around classifications of research which tend to generate topical themes. Examples include: qualitative; quantitative; path analytic; structured equations; forecasting; longitudinal; cross-sectional; etc.. These special interest groups including the Action Research SIG are often made up of a membership ranging from administrators who occasionally have experienced needs to make data-based decisions to evaluators who seek ways to get administrators make data-based decisions. In fact, action research can be defined as investigative studies which address questions of management and design of educational programs through the application of research methodology.

The Problem

At the 1992 annual AERA meeting the Action Research SIG business meeting was visited by a group of researchers who maintained an interest in collaborative research and who had presented papers at that AERA meeting (two of these papers had been accepted by the Action Research SIG. They leveled criticism at the Action Research SIG because the research that it sponsored did not deal exclusively with collaboration. In other words, the contention was that "action research" and "collaborative research" are the same. Although this debate is likely to be as interesting to many as the number of quills on a porcupine, it is vital to those who are interested in the design of research for decision-making to preserve label and identity of "action research". Perhaps, it should be of interest to those doing "collaborative research" to understand that some "collaborative research" can be appropriately classified as "action research", but that some "action research" is not "collaborative research".

Twenty-two papers reporting "collaborative research" were given in 1992 annual AERA program. Fourteen of these twenty-two

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papers were received in response to a request for review. Six of the papers were not sent because the authors felt that they were still not complete. Two simply did not respond. In this paper these fourteen papers will be reviewed in accordance with the definition of "action research" by the Action Research SIG group.

Research Definitions

Lewin in the middle middle 1940s, developed the idea of action research using a three step process of planning, evaluating, and execution (Lewin, 1948). Corey in describing an alternative to basic research used the term action research to categorize applied research (Corey, 1948). From these two references one could define action research as short term research which seeks to provide relevant information for a specified educational decision. The definition presented by Carr (1986, p. 162) appears more restrictive and definitive than the two previous references. Carr states that action research is "simply a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their practice, their understanding of these practices, and their understanding of the situations in which the practices are carried out." Carr omits the provision of decision-related information included in Lewin and Corey and states a definition that is more in keeping with Noffke's definition of collaborative research (Noffke, 1992).

From these definitions seven classifications of research components were derived. Three mandatory criteria for action research were found. They were: the research is conducted in a "quick manner", the research is designed to provide information needed for a decision in the immediate setting, and the research addresses a problem of a practical nature rather than theoretical nature. Four mandatory criteria for collaborative research were found. These include: the researchers work in a collaborative manner, the research is self-reflective, the research seeks improvement in practice, and the research is a study of practices.

From these criteria some questions concerning the relationship of these two types of research can be answered. A research study can be classified as action research with or without collaborating researchers, or with or without self reflection. Yet, a research study cannot be classified as collaborative research without collaborating researchers, or without self reflection. Since collaborative research is a study of practice it is likely "quick", deals with decisions concerning improvement of practice, and addresses a problem in a practical setting. Hence, most collaborative research can be classified as action research, but not most action research can be considered as collaborative research. It appears that the two sets of criteria define overlapping but not synonymous research types. Like action research, collaborative research appears to be a definitive practice. Welcome the new kid on the block collaborative research.

Review of the collaborative studies

In Table 1 are shown the classifications of the fourteen studies relative to the action research criteria. In Table 2 are shown the classifications of the fourteen studies relative to the collaborative research criteria.

Table 1: Classification of Studies By Action Research Criteria

	"quick"	"decision"	"practical"
number satisfying criteria	12	9	12
percentage	85.7	64.3	85.7

Two of the studies exceeded one year in duration. These were involved with establishing readiness in the environment for school related innovation and for partnership development. Five of these studies did not appear to seek to make decisions. Three of these involved testing out or applying products that had been developed such as assessment techniques. two looked at perceptions in a school like environment.

Table 2: Classification of Studies By Collaborative Research Criteria

	"collaboration"	"self-reflective"	"improvement of practice"	"study of practice"
number satisfying criteria	13	13	12	14
percentage	92.9	92.9	85.7	100.0

Although these studies were taken from sessions labeled collaborative research or had collaborative research in their title, one study just did not fit the definition of collaborate or action research. It involved a case study of leadership and was conducted by a single researcher and involved no self reflection or intent to improve practice. A second study focused on teacher empowerment with only inferred improvement in mind.

Thirteen studies illustrated collaborative research efforts representing five different models of collaboration. They were: teacher/researcher model for the improvement of instruction, teacher/teacher model for teacher self improvement and curriculum installation, teacher/student model for the improvement of curriculum, student/student model for the understanding and improvement of interactions, and researcher/agency-head model for the modification of climate. Curriculum study was the most frequently studied topic (five studies) and teachers were involved in the most studies (eleven studies).

Perhaps collaborative research offers to be a source to develop the supportive contingency often sought by the research community. It certainly is an avenue to get non-researchers involved in the process. Corey (1953) proposed this role for action research, but action research has been of limited interest to teachers without collaboration.

The collaborative research reported in these papers showed results which offer the improvement of practice at the same planning seeds for further research. The benefits from peer interaction appear to be one emerging theme of collaborative research. Participants report that collaboration leads to expansion of perception, shared understanding, cross level or discipline friendships, beneficial feedback and productive self reflection. Try it you might like it.

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